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ABSTRACT

Papers on the acquisition and cataloging of serials presented at the 1982 International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference include: (1) "CONSER (CONversion of SERials): What It Is and How It Works," a description by Barrie A. F. Burns (Canada) of a North American cooperative serials cataloging project and its origins, management, standards, organization, participants, activities, input conventions, achievements, products, and problems; (2) "ISDS (International Serials Data System): World-wide Serials Control," a discussion by J. Szilvassy of the birth, objectives, and present and future role of ISDS--a machine-readable registry of international data on serials--and the theoretical and organizational aspects involved in the development of an international databank; (3) "NOSP (Nordisk Samkatalog over Periodica)," a description by Annika Salomonsen of the development of a joint Scandinavian union catalog of foreign serials in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden; and (4) "The Work of a Periodicals Agent," a discussion by John Merriman of methods of serial acquisition, reasons for using an agent, subscription agency services and pricing policies, and the automation of serials processing and publishing. (ESR)

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Serial Publications Section

Collections and Services Division

Papers

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CONSER (CONversion of SERials): what it is and how it works

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Meeting
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CONSER is a cooperative serials cataloguing project involving 20 North American libraries, including the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada, and utilizing the facilities of OCLC (Online Computer Library Center). CONSER's objectives are to create, maintain and distribute a large machine-readable data base of high-quality catalogue records for serials. CONSER's organizational structure, bibliographic standards, input procedures, quality control mechanisms, and methods of distributing the data to the library and information communities in North American and abroad are outlined. Some current problems and recent developments are reviewed, and the overall impact of the project is assessed.

Introduction

CONSER has been the subject of many articles and speeches since its beginnings in 1974,[1-16,19] but it is fitting that it should be a topic at this conference, held in Canada and the theme of which is networking. For CONSER is an important example of a large scale cooperative effort devoted to the bibliographic control of serials, and one which certainly makes use of computerized networking. At the same time, CONSER has plenty of Canadian content - not only are Canadians major participants, but we Canadians like to think that the project was initially conceived on Canadian soil, not at Niagara Falls where honeymooners often go, but at a meeting in Toronto in 1973 of a small group of North American librarians concerned about the conversion of serials data to machine-readable form.

In this presentation I will try to describe CONSER by reviewing its objectives, structure, standards and operating procedures, its quality control mechanisms, and its major products. I will conclude with a discussion of some recent problems and developments, and talk about some things which CONSER can teach us about the networking of bibliographic projects.

CONSER - What It Is

CONSER is a cooperative serials cataloguing project involving 20 North American libraries, including the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada (see Appendix A). The name CONSER is an acronym standing for CONversion of SERials. Included among CONSER's participants are some of the largest and most important research libraries in North America, all of which have at least two things in common - large, active and still growing serials collections, and a desire to find ways of sharing their resources and their efforts at bibliographic control. CONSER's major

objective therefore is to create, maintain and distribute a large, reliable and authoritative machine-readable serials data base to meet the needs not only of the patrons of the participating libraries, but also other users of this information such as abstracting and indexing services and the developing national and international bibliographic networks. In doing this CONSER must of course follow and encourage the use of nationally and internationally accepted standards, rules and conventions for building and maintaining bibliographic records for serials so that these records are transportable for use in a variety of individual or shared library systems.

Most of the bibliographic work on the CONSER file is carried out on-line from terminals installed in the participating libraries and connected to OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) in Dublin Ohio. OCLC currently serves almost three thousand libraries in North America and now in Europe. In addition to offering on-line cataloguing, OCLC operates subsystems for serials control and check-in, union listing and interlibrary loan which fit well with the activities of CONSER and thereby benefit direct users of the OCLC system. CONSER records are also distributed to users outside the OCLC system by the MARC record distribution services of the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada, and have become important components in the serials control activities of many libraries not directly connected to OCLC.

Origins and Management

I will not attempt here to trace the early origins of the CONSER project in detail, beyond observing that when it was first conceived by the Ad Hoc Discussion Group on Serial Data Bases, coordinated by Richard Anable, then of York University in Toronto, it was viewed primarly as a file building activity of limited duration, designed to combine and rationalize the efforts of various libraries which at that time were considering the creation of machine-readable files and wished to avoid duplication of work. Later it became evident that the building of a bibliographic file for serials is never done, because serials are constantly being born, changing, splitting and merging. Thus the project survives to this day.

CONSER came into existence in early 1974 with funding from the Council on Library Resources (CLR) which has been the benefactor of many worthwhile library development projects in North America. CLR initially managed the project and was instrumental in negotiating the agreements with OCLC governing the use of that system for the project. Under these agreements LC and NLC have the right to acquire and distribute the CONSER records in their respective national MARC formats, while OCLC retains full rights to the use of these records in their Online Union Catalog.

CLR's management of the project ended in late 1977, though it has continued to support CONSER in recent years with funding, mainly in the form of grants to develop bibliographic products from the data base and to support telecommunications costs of some participants. Since 1977 OCLC, LC and NLC have acted in effect as co-managers of the project. LC and NLC maintain the project's input standards. OCLC undertakes much of the day-to-day administrative burden, and contributes on-line use of its system for the project to CONSER participants free of charge.

Major operational decisions are taken at meetings of two groups on which all participants are represented - the CONSER Participants, and the CONSER Operational Staff. In addition various subcommittees of these two groups are convened from time to time to adress specific problems. A membership subcommittee has developed and applies criteria for the admission of new CONSER participants. Criteria include such things as the willingness of the institution to follow the prescribed standards, the quality of its cataloguing, the uniqueness of its collection of serials and the ability of the national bibliographic agencies to absorb the added workload of authentication of new input (more about authentication later).

Higher-level policy guidance is provided by the CONSER Advisory Group which includes representation from OCLC, LC, NLC, IFLA, the Association of Research Libraries, the Special Libraries Association, the National Federation of Abstracting and Indexing Services, the British Library, the National Library of Australia, and the U.S. National Libraries of Medicine and Agriculture. The membership of the Advisory Group is indicative of the very wide range of libraries and other organizations that rightly take an interest in bibliographic control of serials and in the efforts of the CONSER Project in improving that control.

Standards

CONSER is sometime thought of as a standard on its own, which of course it is not. This perception has developed in part because of the great importance placed by all participants on following the agreed-upon standards and conventions specified for the project, especially in the area of descriptive cataloguing. But it has also arisen because these standards took much time to develop, requiring as they did a compromise between the capabilities of a major on-line bibliographic utility, the concerns of two national bibliographic agencies, the needs of the participants and other users of OCLC, and the requirements of two major and at times seemingly incompatible systems of bibliographic control for serials - the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules and the International Serial Data System (ISDS) Guidelines.

The standards for input in the project were originally summarized in the CONSER Manual first published in 1977. More specific input requirements are set forth and kept up to date in the CONSER edition of the MARC Serials Editing Guide maintained and published by the Library of Congress. The Marc Serials Editing Guide is the true "Bible" for CONSER input and ensures that records can be output from OCLC which meet the requirements of both the LC and Canadian MARC communication formats for serials.

Users of authenticated CONSER records can be assured that the name headings and other descriptive cataloguing information contained therein conform to AACR and ISDS as appropriate. Since late 1980 all newly entered titles must meet the provisions of the second edition of AACR. Where practicable, AACR 1 headings in older CONSER records have been or are being upgraded to AACR 2 as resources permit. A partial automatic conversion of the OCLC data base from AACR 1 to AACR 2 and contributions of converted records from NLC and other participants have assisted this process.[17,18]

CONSER records also accomodate the data requirements for the registration of serials under the ISDS program. The U.S. National Center for ISDS, the National Serials Data Program in the Library of Congress, is able to generate tapes from the CONSER file for reporting to the ISDS International Centre in Paris. ISDS Canada at NLC hopes to have this capability soon.

While the major focus of standardization in CONSER is on descriptive cataloguing, participants are encouraged to input good quality subject information as well. In titles which are held and catalogued by the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada subject headings are validated as having been assigned from the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and classification numbers from the Library of Congress Classification and the Dewey Decimal Classification. In addition, authenticated records for Canadian titles will contain bilingual subject headings, derived not only from LCSH but also from Canadian Subject Headings and the Répertoire de vedettes-matières, the major French language list of headings modelled on LCSH and published by l'Université Laval in Québec City. Records contributed by other participants may also contain subject headings assigned from specialized subject heading lists such as Medical Subject Headings (MESH) of the U.S. National Library of Medicine, or headings assigned by the U.S. National Agricultural Library. These headings are identified as such in the CONSER records.

CONSER - How it Works

Having described what CONSER is and something of its origins, let us look briefly at how the project works. Perhaps the major operational features of the CONSER project are its mechanisms for quality control of input. We have already discussed two of these mechanisms, the CONSER input standards themselves, and the procedures and criteria for the admission of new participants.

Quality of input is further ensured by a review and validation process called authentication, carried out by Centers of Responsibility and protected by the automatic "locking" of authenticated records in the data base so that they cannot be changed on-line by unauthorized users. There are currently two Centers of Responsibility in CONSER - the National Library of Canada which has been given the responsibility for authenticating Canadian titles, and the Library of Congress which has responsibility for validating all other titles. The authentication process differs slightly in these two institutions, but basically consists of reviewing the content and machine coding of all or selected data elements in the record created by others to certify that they meet the standards and practices agreed upon for the project. This is normally done by comparing the record after it has been entered or upgraded on-line against the standards, with a surrogate of the title itself in hand. A surrogate is normally a photocopy of the title page and/or the cover, masthead or other sources of information specified in AACR. Surrogates are sent to the appropriate Center of Responsibility by the participant which originally input or upgraded the record. Once the Center of Responsibility is satisfied that the record meets the standards, it assigns an authentication code to the record on-line. This code not only informs all users that the record has been authenticated and identifies it for selection in certain products, but also locks the record in the on-line data base. At the moment the entire record is locked and only LC, NLC and data base maintenance staff at OCLC may make changes to such records. In future it is hoped to refine the locking mechanism on the OCLC system so that only selected fields could be locked against subsequent updating. Any Participant could then make changes to other parts of the record. Under present procedures, when CONSER participants find something in an authenticated record that needs changing they must refer the matter to either OCLC or the appropriate Center of Responsibility for action by filling out a change request form and, in many cases, forwarding a surrogate.

Input Conventions

In the early phases of building the CONSER file participants were assigned responsibility for systematically inputting various subset of titles, for example, by letter of the alphabet or subject. Today participants merely input the new titles they currently are cataloguing or recataloguing, or create records for their retrospective titles if they can find resources to do so. It should be remembered that all CONSER participants have access to the complete OCLC Online Union Catalog into which other OCLC users who are not CONSER participants are also entering records for their serials. As of

early 1982 the total number of serial records in the OCLC Union Catalog, including the CONSER file, was in excess of 485,000. CONSER participants will frequently "claim" records for the CONSER file which were originally input by other OCLC users by upgrading them to minimum CONSER status, rather than inputting completely new records. Often this process involves only adding the participant's library symbol to the record, signifying that the participant holds the title and accepts the record for CONSER. During 1981 almost 54% of the 67,000 records added to the CONSER file were claimed or upgraded in this manner (see Appendix B).

Participants must input new titles according to the successive entry convention of AACR 2 which calls for creating a new record for each significant title change. Participants are encouraged whenever possible to enter older titles in this fashion as well. Because many of the participants could not afford the considerable cost of splitting out their older records according to the successive entry convention, many CONSER records, including authenticated ones, are today still structured according to the latest title convention. Because many users of the OCLC on-line system over the years have attached their holdings to these records, splitting latest title entries into successive entries has to be considered with great care to preserve the integrity of the holdings of these libraries on the data base. Because of this and the bilingual cataloguing policy of the National Library of Canada, it is therefore quite permissible to create more than one record for the same publication in the CONSER data base. Such dual records are permitted when a participant elects to enter a successive entry title for any of the titles mentioned in the latest entry of a serial created under earlier conventions. For bilingual (English - French) publications the National Library of Canada creates two records, one with English as the language of cataloguing and the other in French. Finally, because NLC will catalog Canadian serials in the French language with French records, other participants who prefer to catalog these titles in English may enter additional English records for these titles. Separate records are also permissible for the hard copy and microform versions of a serial.
Every effort is made by participants to avoid creating unwanted or unacceptable duplicate records in the data base, and to bring any duplicates they find to the attention of OCLC data base maintenance staff whose task it is to delete these unwanted records. In fiscal year 1979/80 OCLC staff deleted almost 6,000 such records.[20]

Not all of the record creation for CONSER is done on-line. From the beginning of the project batch loading of machine-readable serial records from magnetic tape to the CONSER data base has been an important method of contributing significant numbers of records. Indeed the CONSER file began in 1975 with the batch loading of some 75,000 records from the data base of

the Minnesota Union List of Serials contributed by MINITEXT (the Minnesota Interlibrary Telecommunications Exchange). Similarly the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada contributed their respective national MARC serial files on tape. The data bases of two other regional union lists, the Pittsburgh Regional Library Consortium, and the Florida Union List of Serials were also contributed on tape. The other participants have built upon this base with on-line input. The National Library of Canada continues to contribute most of the authenticated records for Canadian titles by sending to OCLC biweekly Canadian MARC tapes generated from its own automated systems used to produce the national bibliography Canadiana in Ottawa. These records are regularly loaded into the OCLC data base by OCLC staff.

Achievements and Products

What has the CONSER project been able to achieve in its 7 years of operation? The major achievement has been the creation and systematic enrichment of a very large file of machine-readable serial records. As of the end of 1981 an estimated total of approximately 367,000 records were in the CONSER file, of which some 135,000 had been authenticated - 31,000 by the National Library of Canada and 104,000 by the Library of Congress (see Appendix B). Of the 367,000 authenticated and unauthenticated CONSER records approximately 51% (186,000) had been input on-line or off-line by project participants since late 1975. The remaining 49% represent records originally batch loaded in 1975 or subsequently input by other users of the OCLC Union Catalog who were not CONSER participants. This suggests that over the life of the project, the CONSER participants have either been cataloguing many serials which the other OCLC users do not acquire, catalog or input, or cataloguing and inputting them before other OCLC users do so. It is however interesting to note that during the past three years 1979-1981 the percentage of titles input by non-participants and then "captured" for the CONSER file each year has increased from 35% in 1979 to 54% in 1981, probably reflecting a growth in both the overall number of OCLC users and the number and range of serial titles they are inputting to the data base as OCLC's processing subsystems for union list production and serial control have come into wider use. That CONSER participants have been able to claim such large and increasing numbers of titles often with little change may also reflect the fact that non-participants in CONSER are endevouring to follow CONSER standards in much of their input, thus benefitting all OCLC users.

But the effects of CONSER outside the OCLC system are of equal if not greater interest and importance for our Conference theme of networking. As mentioned above, both the Library of Congress and the National Library of Canada distribute authenticated CONSER records to subscribers of their respective MARC records distribution services. As of April 1982 LC had 23 subscribers to its MARC tape service for serials which includes all authenticated CONSER records. LC also distributes copies of a combined file of both the authenticated and unauthenticated CONSER records known as the CONSER "Snapshot" file. The unauthenticated records in this file display somewhat greater variability in quality of input since many of them represent older contributed records which have not yet been upgraded to current standards. Earlier this year LC announced a regular monthly unauthenticated CONSER record tape service which will supplement the CONSER Snapshot.

The CONSER project and the use of the OCLC system by LC as its automated serial cataloguing system have made possible the more effective automation and redesign of New Serial Titles (NST), LC's major printed bibliographic tool for listing current serials. The redesigned NST comprises records input specifically for the product by LC as well as CONSER records contributed by other participants.

The National Library of Canada distributes authenticated CONSER records in Canadian MARC format to seven regular subscribers to its MARC Records Distribution Service. Included among the recipients of the CONSER CAN/MARC records from NLC is the Canadian bibliographic utility UTLAS (University of Toronto Library Automation Systems) which serves some 600 libraries in Canada, the U.S. and Japan. Infomart, a Canadian broker of on-line retrieval services, also receives these tapes, as do several Canadian university libraries with their own automated systems. Another of NLC's CONSER subscribers provides serials ordering and subscription management services to Canadian libraries. During fiscal 1981/82, NLC distributed a total of over 500,000 copies of CONSER records to its direct subscribers. NLC also loads the authenticated CONSER records into its on-line DOBIS library management system which is now being used by NLC and nine other Canadian federal government libraries, including Canada's major scientific library, the Canada Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (CISTI) and the Library of Parliament. CONSER records are also playing a role in the construction of the data bases for the two major national union lists of serials in Canada, the Union List of Serials in the Social Sciences and Humanities Held in Canadian Libraries = Liste collective des publications en série dans le domaine des sciences sociales et humaines dans les bibliothèques canadiennes (ISSN 0227-3187) published by NLC, and the Union List of Scientific Serials in Canadian Libraries = Catalogue collectif des publications scientifiques dans les bibliothèques canadiennes published by CISTI. Both of these bibliographic tools are or soon will be by-products of the DOBIS data base.

NLC also publishes CONSER Microfiche, an annual COM microfiche listing of the authenticated CONSER records in a register/index format. This product was developed by NLC with the assistance of a grant from the Council on Library Resources. It is currently distributed in Canada and outside the U.S. by NLC, while LC copies and distributes it in the U.S. NLC currently has 218 subscribers, including 40 outside Canada. There are 185 U.S. subscribers.

Problems/Developments/Lessons

CONSER has not been without its problems. No large scale cooperative venture of this kind ever is. To conclude this review I want briefly to discuss some of these problems and to indicate how they are currently being resolved in the project. Out of this discussion will I hope come some idea of what we can learn about the networking of cooperative bibliographic projects.

As will be clear from the figures quoted above, substantially less than half the CONSER file remains unauthenticated. A very heavy workload of authentication has fallen on the Library of Congress, which is assigned responsibility for authenticating all non-Canadian titles. Until recently unauthenticated records were unavailable in machine-readable form from either LC or NLC. LC's distribution of the CONSER Snapshot file and its monthly unauthenticated CONSER records tape service have overcome that difficulty for U.S. subscribers. Canadian libraries will not be able to benefit from this for the time being because the unauthenticated CONSER records are not available from OCLC in CAN/MARC format.

LC has also tried to tackle the problem of authentication by in effect delegating authentication responsibilities to other CONSER participants in the U.S. which are also participating with LC in other cooperative bibliographic projects. Much of the emphasis in LC's authentication process is on verification of name headings in the records and ensuring that these headings are entered in their automated authority file. LC therefore hopes ultimately to be able to streamline some of its authentication by accepting with little or no detailed review the CONSER records contributed by those U.S. libraries which are also participating in its Name Authorities Co-op (NACO).[20] Under NACO participating libraries agree to contribute name headings for inclusion in LC's automated name authority file which will form the basis for a National Name Authority File Service (NAFS) in the U.S. to be made available online through the major bibliographic utilities and on tape and in microform from LC.[21] LC trains staff from NACO libraries in its automated authorities procedures, and relies on these libraries to contribute headings which meet all bibliographic standards. CONSER participants which are also NACO participants include the U.S. Government Printing Office, the National Library of Medicine, the U.S. Dept. of the Interior, Harvard University, the University of Washington and the University of California, Los Angeles.

The rise of other major automated bibliographic utilities and systems in North America such as the Washington Library Network (WLN) and the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) of the Research Libraries Group (RLG) has posed further problems for the CONSER Project. Several CONSER participants, hitherto users of the OCLC system, have recently joined RLIN and are faced with the prospect of having to continue inputting CONSER records to OCLC while doing the rest of their cataloguing on RLIN. The University of Washington does dual input on WLN and OCLC. The cost of maintaining two different sets of online input procedures for two systems is naturally a concern for these libraries. As an interim measure the feasibility of contributing CONSER input from RLIN libraries to OCLC on tape is being investigated. The long term solution to this problem is expected to be computer-to-computer communications between the utilities.[15] This is the objective of several projects in the U.S. now being funded by the Council on Library Resources and in which the Library of Congress and U.S. utilities are involved.[21]

As you may have heard elsewhere at this Conference, similar approaches are being taken in Canada, in the context of interconnection of individual or shared computerized library and information systems according to the Open Systems Interconnection model of ISO.[22] The National Library of Canada certainly hopes one day that it will be possible to input serial records initially on its own DOBIS on-line cataloguing system and then transfer copies of those records directly to the host data base for CONSER which will probably remain on OCLC for the forseable future. This would help streamline present procedures which now require knowledge and synchronization of three completely different sets of system conventions - one for OCLC, one for DOBIS and one for NLC's existing batch system which is now being phased out.

What can we learn about bibliographic networking from the CONSER Project? Three things in the main. The first is that it takes a very great deal of time and effort to develope bibliographic standards and conventions affecting a large number of participants with differing requirements, and then to keep these conventions up to date in the face of changing circumstances.

A related and second lesson is that participation in projects such as CONSER is costly for the participants, though it may bring benefits to other libraries. CONSER participants have willingly done a lot of extra work and set up a lot additional procedures in order to be able to produce the kind of standardized serial records which they all agreed was required.

The third lesson is that the ideal system for conducting such a project doesn't yet exist, though I'm sure some CONSER participants have wondered at one time or another whether there wasn't something better just around the corner. The capabilities envisaged in some of the newer telecommunications systems which will make possible the linking and sharing of computerized bibliographic data bases hold out promise of such an ideal system in the future. In projects involving international exchange of data such systems must embody sufficient flexibility to meet the requirements of varying national or international exchange formats and multilingual cataloguing conventions.

Systems are however a reflection of their users as well as of their designers. Confronted with the complexity of cooperative projects such as CONSER, individual libraries with a contribution to make may be tempted to throw up their hands and conclude that it is too troublesome to cooperate. It will always seem to be easier to do it yourself rather than to cooperate, but the extent to which libraries can do it themselves in future is now by no means clear given the state of the world economy and the rising information expectations of library patrons. It seems to me that the lesson of CONSER is that we will have to learn to cooperate in better ways with better systems or we may not survive at all.

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Appendix A

Participants in CONSER (CONversion of SERials)

1974 to Date[1]

Boston Theological Institute 1975-

Cornell University 1974-

Harvard University 1976-

Indiana University 1979-

Library of Congress (including National Serials Data Program (NSDP)) 1974-

Minnesota Union List of Serials (MINITEX: Minnesota Interlibrary Telecommunication Exchange) 1974-

National Agricultural Library (U.S.) 1974-

National Library of Canada (including ISDS Canada) 1974-

National Library of Medicine (U.S.) 1974-

New York State Library 1974-

State University of New York 1974-

U.S. Department of the Interior 1976-

U.S. Government Printing Office 1980-

University of California (University Library Automation Project), Berkeley, 1974-1980[2]

University of California, Los Angeles 1980-

University of Florida, Gainesville (Florida Union List of Serials) 1975-

University of Michigan 1980-

University of Texas, Austin 1980-

University of Washington 1980-

Yale University 1974-

Notes

1. Dates indicate year of affiliation. Institutions dating from 1974 were the initial or founding participants.

2. No longer a participant.

CONSER (CONversion of SERials)

FACT SHEET[1]

CONSER File 1975-1981 (As of December 31, 1981)

	1975-1978	1979	1980	1981	TOTAL
Original Input[2]	n.a.	20,281	17,807	17,963	56,051
LC Copy	n.a	2,414	4,950	4,126	11,490
Other	161,575[4]	20,347	16,902	9,342	208,166
Related Records Modified or Created	n.a.	2,366	1,300	1,066	4,732
Records Claimed for CONSER[3]	n.a.	20,360	30,840	35,111	86,311
TOTALS	161,575[4]	65,768	71,799	67,608	366,750[4]

Authenticated Records

Cumulative:	
NLC	31,043
LC	103,557
Total	134,600

OCLC Online Union Catalog (September 30, 1981)

	No.	%
Serial bibliographic records	483,166	-
Status of serials		
Currently published	267,810	55.4
No longer published	127,960	26.5
Unknown	87,596	18.1

Notes

1. Adapted from: "CONSER Management Statistics" in CONSER: Conversion of Serials, ISSN 0163-8610, no. 6 (February 1982).

2. Includes records input on-line or in batch by LC and NLC.

3. Records originally input by users of OCLC who are not CONSER participants, and subsequently upgraded to CONSER status by the participants.

4. Estimate based on figures for 1981 CONSER Snapshot file selected August 1, 1981.

réseaux
48e conférence générale de l'IFLA – Montréal
22-28 août 1982
Fédération internationale des associations
de bibliothécaires et des bibliothèques

networks
48th IFLA General Conference – Montréal
August 22-28, 1982
International Federation of Library
Associations and Institutions

1982

IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE, MONTREAL 1982

DIVISION: Division of Collections and Services

SECTION: Section on Serial Publications

32/SER/2-E
197-CS

ISDS: World-wide serials control

by

J. SZILVÁSSY

Meeting
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Abstract

The birth and objectives of ISDS (International Serials Data System) are presented. The example thereof and experiences gained therewith are used in an attempt at specifying the conditions of organizing the international network of a document-oriented registration system, together with the practical problems encountered. Furthermore, the present role of ISDS in the information handling community is examined, suggesting some ideas on the potential as yet unexploited advantages of ISDS.

ISDS: WORLD-WIDE SERIALS CONTROL

In 1981 ISDS celebrated its 10th anniversary. The past ten years witnessed the rapid growth of an international system which, by now, has obtained a dominant role in world-wide bibliographic control.

I. Background

The general concept of the International Serials Data System was elaborated by the UNISIST/ICSU AB Working Group on Bibliographic Descriptions and published in 1970 in a feasibility study.(1) Accordingly ISDS, an intergovernmental organization established within the Unesco/UNISIST programme in 1971, has the objective of setting up and maintaining an authentic registry of world serial publications with essential information for their bibliographic identification. ISDS is a two-tier system with a central core, the International Centre (IC) in Paris which is in close cooperation with national/regional centres in all parts of the world. At present the ISDS network comprises 45 national and 2 regional centres.

The National Centres register the serials published in their own countries and forward these data to the IC. The latter establishes and maintains the machine-readable international file and is responsible for the dissemination of information on the basis of its data bank to all participating countries, organizations and individual users. In addition to the foregoing, registration, file building

and maintenance are coordinated by the IC throughout the network.

The Base File

The file contains presently 150,000 serials records and is growing at the rate of 25-30,000 records per year. The initial file consisted of the machine-readable data base of 5 major abstracting-indexing services: Biosis, Bulletin Signalétique, Chemical Abstracts, Geological Abstracts, Inspec. The file has been extended ever since, not only in number but also in its scope: various fields of knowledge are represented, scientific and technical serials reaching approximately 50% of the total number of records.

Services provided by the IC

a. Machine-readable products:

- the complete international file
- bi-monthly updates to the international file
- subsets on request

b. Published products:

- the ISDS Register on microfiche, listing all the records contained in the Base File with an ISSN and an alphabetical title index
- regular updates to the ISDS Register in the form of the bi-monthly ISDS Bulletin
- semi-annual supplements to the International List of Title Word Abbreviations and periodic cumulations of these supplements both in hard-copy and on microfiche
- cumulated lists of cancelled International Standard Serial Number (ISSN).

All entries contained in ISDS products are presented in upper and lower case with all the diacritics used in the various languages and romanization schemes.

II. Fundamentals

In the light of the experiences gained in operating the ISDS, an attempt will be made here to arrive at conclusions of general nature concerning the development and organization of an international data bank and the background network thereof, reviewing the theoretical and organizational aspects involved.

1. Theoretical aspects

1.1. Application of standards

The importance of adhering to international standards in information handling and transfer is generally appreciated: these are the guarantee for effective operation and widely used products. Building a data bank and assuring its accessibility on a national and international level depend on the proper application of the standards concerning the input, the processing-, and the exchange format, as well as the tagging scheme, transliteration and the character set. Moreover, standardization of the software, where appropriate, would also appear desirable.

In the absence of standards or similar rules the network itself will have to assume the function of elaborating, for its own purposes, the guide-lines regulating every detail of the operational procedure.

ISDS has to cope with two major difficulties. On the one hand the data suppliers are countries with different publishing traditions and in different stages of development, and on the other hand, the users, such as libraries, bibliographic agencies, abstracting and indexing services, publishers etc. contact ISDS with widely different objectives. It has been recognized from the very beginning that in order to meet these requirements work was to be organized on the basis of common rules, formats and standards throughout the network, according to jointly established policies and uniform operational procedures. These were set out in the Guidelines for ISDS(2) the revised edition of which is under preparation.
Beyond the foregoing, two additional aspects related to standardization should be mentioned:

a. Since abbreviated serial titles are an essential element in ISDS records, the IC was given the responsibility of maintaining the ISO International List of Periodical Title Word Abbreviations (ISO 833) and has undertaken, since 1971, to publish semi-annual supplements to it. Since the withdrawal of the standard which proved to be inadequate for the purposes of the whole range of languages represented in ISDS, the IC took over the task of establishing and maintaining the merged list of word abbreviations instead.
Parallel hereto the revision of the rules for abbreviation (ISO 4) was being carried out in close cooperation with the IC and all ISDS centres engaged in the revision and/or elaboration of national standard lists.

b. For technical reasons all non-roman scripts (15 are represented in the file) have to be romanized in order to be entered into the file. However, not a single romanization scheme has become a final international standard so far, most schemes are drafts under revision or only national transliteration schemes. The IC had to find interim solutions conscious of the fact that a large number of records will have to be converted eventually once a romanization scheme will be approved of as an international standard.

1.2 Elimination of language-specific information

An international data bank receives information in numerous languages (85 in the case of ISDS). As the participants cannot be obliged to use a common working language, it is preferable to adopt numerical codes for every type of information, except for essential content elements, closely connected to the language. International document identification codes, suited to identification purposes in both manual and computer-based data files have been introduced in response to the foregoing. The literature on the subject also emphasizes the desirability of using classification systems based on numerical codes instead of subject headings. These would, on the one hand, necessitate cross referencing multi-lingual lists, and on the other, involve the burden of having to prepare an internationally accepted standard subject heading list.

In the ISDS data base the subject content is indicated by one of the three classification systems: UDC, Dewey and LC, a concordance file being under development. It is also planned to introduce UDC numbers automatically into all records on this basis.

1.3 Compatibility in the presentation of information and in the tools of information processing and transfer

In comparison with subject-oriented systems with a broad spectrum of contents, the document-oriented systems are characterized by the identity of formal elements specific to a particular type of document. For this reason a document-oriented international data bank can function as a coherent source unless the formal elements are presented within the system in a manner compatible with the international standard-like prescriptions (ISBD) and/or with the national (regional) cataloguing rules and national standards based on them. This is in the interest of all cooperating partners as well, since bibliographic control for international purposes of a given type of document will function rationally in the individual countries only if it forms an organic part of its own national processing work and is a by-product thereof. The same applies to the vehicles of information processing and exchange, viz. the machine formats: only internationally recognized and/or standardized compatible computer formats make possible the exchange of input and output, that is the feed-back into national channels of the international output produced by a system in exchange for national cooperation.

ISDS Centres are normally focal points of their respective national information networks and as such, are closely involved in national projects. This is why the Directors' Meetings[3], the regular annual sessions of the Directors of the National and Regional Centres became so important: it is the forum where international and national interests are confronted and discussed, where ISDS specifications and rules (the Guidelines) are revised aiming at utmost compatibility, not

only within the network but also with the different objectives of other organizations: ISO, IFLA etc. The ISDS input format, generally agreed upon, is based on the MARC format which the national centres are free to narrow down or expand, to suit their particular requirements.

2. Organizational aspects

2.1 Organization of a network

Subject-oriented (also called special) information services may be set up in a centralized form (e.g. of a commercial character like Toxline) or in a decentralized form (e.g. Cultural Data Bank for Europe). This latter means that the system consists of a chain of cooperating centres, which assume largely proportionate shares of the tasks of operation and organization, while the uniform handling of data becomes extremely cumbersome, even virtually impossible.

In the case of document-oriented information systems the model of a two-tier system is preferable which combines the advantages of centralization and decentralization alike. In the closely related network of international and national centres it is the international centre that performs the processing-, organizational- and coordinating functions, whereas the national centres furnish, on the one hand, their expertise and experiences concerning the document, and act, on the other hand, like a transmission belt in forwarding all information obtained from the international centre.

In the case of ISDS, the manifold tasks of the IC comprise, in addition to those already mentioned, such as file building and maintenance plus different kinds of services, the following:

- coordination of the ISDS network (by establishing and publishing common rules and procedures, initial training of the professional- and computer staff of national/regional centres, creation and transfer of computer software);

- extension of the ISDS network (by promoting the establishment of new centres, participation in national and regional seminars mostly in developing countries);

- representation of ISDS interests in the projects and programmes of international organizations related to the field of serials, participation in their work.

National (regional) centres, on their part, are expected to perform the following functions:

- establishment and maintenance of data banks containing a common set of data elements essential for the identification of the serials published in their respective territories, the main identifying elements being the ISSN (4) and the key-title;

- contributing the above information towards the international file;

- promoting the use of ISSN within their countries by establishing communications with serial literature publishers;

- participation in the establishment and maintenance of common rules and procedures;

- dissemination of information (by distributing ISDS services and products, response to requests for ISSN assignments emanating from publishers or national/international organizations, furnishing information from their national data banks, moreover from the international file, the complete duplicate of which may also be maintained by national centres) ;

- hosting of international or regional meetings.

2.2 Administration of a network

An international network is managed along the familiar pattern: the appointed head is supported by a board of representatives elected from among the delegates of the participating countries, the main policies of the system being debated and agreed upon by the general assemblies convened at regular intervals.

ISDS is governed by the General Assembly consisting of representatives of the Member States which have adhered to the Statutes of the ISDS IC. The International Centre is controlled by a Governing Board elected by the General Assembly. The IC is administered by a director, appointed by the French Government in agreement with the Director General of Unesco.
The functions and sphere of action of the above administrative organs are foreseen in the Statutes, the final text of which was approved by the French Government in 1977.

2.3 Financial aspects

In a decentralized system the maintenance costs are distributed evenly among the responsible centres. In contrast thereto a system with an international centre functioning in an institutional framework with paid staff, is financed by a host state and/or by one of the specialized agencies of the UN, further the membership fees contributed by the Member States. The extent of such contribution may be calculated on the basis of different models, no standard procedure having been developed. Document-oriented systems occupy a special position in this respect as well. It should be noted that the primary information produced by a subject-oriented system is accessible to direct use, whatever the discipline concerned (nuclear energy, agriculture etc.), so that, evidently, the interest of the cooperating partners is also a direct one. In contrast thereto the document-oriented systems may be termed service systems in that the information provided by them serves only as secondary, indirect data for special information systems. It will be realized from the foregoing that the benefits accruing to the users from the document-oriented system will vary in direct proportion with the level of development which the information system in a particular country has attained. Consequent therefrom, their significance should be appraised in the context of the actual national information system, remembering that for making full use of the inherent possibilities, a far-reaching programme may be necessary. It appears, therefore, that as the interest of

some participating countries is but an indirect and generally not an immediate one, their willingness to support such a system financially is low.

In the case of ISDS the situation is as follows:
In the opinion of experts the full development of the system may be expected by 1985 only, and it is assumed that automation in the Member States will attain, by that time, a level high enough to enable them to exploit the possibilities inherent to the system in the various domains of the registration and identification of data. At the present, the interest on the part of the developed countries is self-evident, while cooperation of the smaller and the developing countries is motivated by the flexible organization of the system: in exchange for a relatively small input these countries have world-wide access to the most authentic information in the field of serial publications.

III. The role of ISDS in the information handling community

ISDS is a registration system aiming at the identification and bibliographic control of serials. Its computer system has been developed gradually at rates depending on the availability of funds and computer facilities. At present, retrieval is feasible in batch form only on basis of the ISSN (field 022), the key-title (222), and several information codes (008) in any combination. Early this year a mini-computer (a Siemens 7531) has been installed at the IC, and by means thereof, in the on-line system under development retrieval will be possible according to UDC numbers (080), imprint data (260) , and the abbreviated key-title (210) . It must be borne in mind, however, that for successful functioning and for its present as well as future results, ISDS depends on the International Standard Serial Number, the ISSN.

Misunderstandings regarding the ISSN, as well as comparisons with the ISBN are well-known from the literature. In connection with the ISSN it is essential to know that in contrast to the ISBN, it is a title identifier which means that the ISSN identifies the key-title of a given

serial publication as long as it is published under the same title. The change of the title involves the assignment of a new ISSN. This feature makes the ISSN eminently suited to the unique and unambiguous identification of serials, to tracing the changes in title, and to serve as a basis of exchanging relevant information between computer based data files.

Because of these advantages the ISSN has been adopted for identification and/or commercial purposes by

- subsciption agencies, publishers' catalogues, periodicals' directories, various relevant lists of national and international organizations;
- the IFLA Office for International Lending, on the new international loan request form introduced in 1975 to accelerate request handling and thus to support the UAP programme;
- the U.S. Postal Service in cooperation with the N.S.D.P. to substitute the postal numbers in 1979 (5). Similar attempts have been considered in the socialist countries as well, at the 1980 Tbilisi Conference of the Ministers of Communication;
- the ISO, including ISSN (and the key-title, if appropriate), as the unambiguous reference to serial publications in all relevant international standards.

Further, the ISSN and the complete or abridged ISDS records are used in the following fields:

- As primary information in union catalogues (national and regional),

  in all kinds of holding lists, legal deposit (copyright) registries, and key-title-ISSN indexes (local and national);
- as secondary data in special information systems,

  and in the products of A & I services (national and international).

The role of ISDS in the UBC programme was emphasized in the recommendations of the Paris world-bibliographic conference in 1977, establishing that the system ensures transnational bibliographic control of serial publications. Although ISDS provides no thorough bibliographic descriptions, only a restricted set of data elements essential to identification, these being internationally standardized, can be extended as desired to comply with ISBD requirements, or conversely, they can be derived from the complete bibliographic description. In this way, ISDS data are not unrelated to national bibliographic products but serve as their basis or are derived therefrom and allow a faster exchange of information.

IV. Future development of ISDS

The 1980-1983 medium-term policy of ISDS was agreed upon by the third General Assembly held in 1980, declaring the desirability of making the system more user-oriented.

The main trends of development can be formulated as follows:

a. concerning the contents of the services:

- adding classification codes to all records as an obligatory element, also retrospectively, to permit subject access to the file;
- maintaining subscription addresses in the case of lesser known publishers or corporate authors acting as publishers, to facilitate access to the original documents;
- flagging new serials and ceased publications both in the Register and the Bulletin, to simplify the work of abstracting and indexing services.

b. In order to expand services:

- publishing of a classified index to supplement the cumulated yearly indexes of the Register and the Bulletin;
- providing subsets of the Base File on various subjects as requested;
- producing an international index of abbreviated key-title and ISSN;
- publishing an ISDS handbook for interested parties outside the network.

c. Concerning the presentation of services:

In order to satisfy the different demands of the users, a resolution was accepted, according to which the Base File or parts of it should be available in four forms: hard copy, microfiche, magnetic tape and on-line access.

As regards future applications, the advantages of ISDS can be exploited in a number of additional fields of which two are worth while mentioning:

- utilization of the ISSN for the machine-readable bar codes of periodicals in cooperation with the European Article Numbering Association. British developments, under the auspices of the Periodical Publishers' Association seem to be promising;
- elaboration of special standard software packages for the establishment of automated national union catalogues in developing countries.

To summarize. The first ten-year phase of ISDS is over. The Base File, comprising new and current, as well as retrospective titles of all types of serials has been built up continuously both by systematic

registration and in response to requests from users. The policy and mechanism of the system has been constantly adjusted to keep up with new demands.

I believe that on the basis of a better understanding of what we set out to do, the opportunity is now given to all interested parties to work in common for the future development of the system in the interest of the world-wide benefit of the information handling community.

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IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE, MONTREAL 1982

DIVISION: Division of Collections and Services

SECTION: Section on Serial Publications

33/SER/3-E
197-CS

NOSP

by

Annika SALOMONSEN

Meeting
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NOSP

NOSP, which stands for Nordisk Samkatalog over Periodica, is a joint Scandinavian venture to produce a union catalogue of foreign serials in all five Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. NOSP receives financial support from NORDINFO, the Nordic Council for Scientific Information and Research Libraries. NOSP is a network of Scandinavian libraries and union catalogues. Its essence is use of trans-border data flow to share resources, which is also the theme of IFLA 1982.

NOSP has been the subject of many committees and reports for more than twenty years in the Scandinavian library community owing to the long felt need of a union list of serials for interlending purposes. Use of machine-readable data made it possible to realize NOSP. A financial grant from NORDINFO in 1977 started the work. A steering committee with one representative from each of the participating countries was appointed. The national co-ordinating bodies for research libraries were responsible for nominating the members of the steering committee. It was decided that the co-ordinating work in connection with the establishment of NOSP should take place at the University Library of Helsinki.

Use of machine-readable bibliographic information was one of the corner-stones in the five-year-plan for NOSP. ISDS, International Serials Data System, was chosen for the following reasons:

1. The Scandinavian countries take part in ISDS and are represented on the ISDS Governing Board, General Assembly and international meetings of ISDS Directors.

2. The International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) assigned in conjunction with the key-title could provide a link between data bases.

3. All members of ISDS receive ISDS records in machine-readable form free of charge.

A format for reporting summarized holdings of the participating libraries was decided upon. Contracts between the participants and the NOSP-centre were signed. In four of the five participating countries the contracts were signed by the editors of the national union catalogues of serials. In the fifth country, Denmark, there was no national union catalogue and this is the reason why the contracts were signed by individual research libraries. The number of participating research libraries in Denmark has grown gradually. Close-knit groups of Scandinavian libraries representing well-defined subjects have established union catalogues and two of those chose to join NOSP.

A COM-produced microfiche was chosen as a distribution medium because it is cheaper and faster to produce and easier to update and distribute than the printed form on paper. The first NOSP-Mikro was produced in 1978 on A6 microfiche with the reduction 48x. The number of titles reported has grown four times from 11,000 in 1978 to 40,000 in 1981 and the number of holdings almost six times from 34,750 to 198,500 in the same period (fig.1). The holdings and the ISDS bibliographic data are linked together by ISSN to make the NOSP record. Since 1980 NOSP-mikro is produced twice annually. To the benefit of the user it is cumulated every time in spite of the costs. The catalogue consists of a main title list, a supplement to the main list, an ISSN-index and a library index. The titles registered in the supplement are to be regarded as provisional until the titles are registered in ISDS. Only titles with an ISSN are registered in NOSP. A NOSP record consists of the following data elements:

Key-title with the assigned ISSN
Parallel titles
Publisher
Place of publication
Date of first and last issue published
Holdings according to country

References are made to former and to successive titles and from issuing bodies.

The aim of ISDS is to provide a reliable registry of world serial publications by using the expertise at national and regional centres. This makes ISDS a perfect starting point for a project like NOSP. The International Centre and the different national ISDS centres have been most helpful in trying to help NOSP to establish a complete union catalogue of foreign serials in Scandinavian libraries but in spite of quick response to users' requests we have had to face the fact that NOSP is not yet comprehensive. The main concern of the users is the lack of comprehensiveness. The speeding-up of the ISDS registration is the important issue for all users as is the case wherever national bibliographic data in machine-readable form is used. We tried to solve the lack of ISSN in different ways. The machine-readable records without ISSN in the Finnish National Union Catalogue, Finuc-S, were filed according to country codes and sent to the national ISDS centre concerned. At the moment copies of title pages without an ISSN are sent to the International Centre by the NOSP-centre.

If we look at the lack of ISSN from another point of view it is evident from statistics produced by the NOSP-centre that serials in the exact sciences are better covered than serials in the humanities (fig.2). The ISDS International Centre (IC) started to compile a base file of about 25,000 serials culled from five existing tape files. The problem of lack of ISSN, mostly owing to lack of resources at the International Centre and at regional and national centres, may be solved by culling existing tape files once again and in this way broaden the coverage of subjects. As ISDS is established within the framework of UNESCO's World Science Information System UNISIST, it may be possible to use the machine-readable files of serials of, for instance, the International Nuclear Information System (INIS) and the Agricultural Information System (AGRIS). I am fully aware that loading of tapes into a data base and transfer of data from one database to another, without human review, pose problems but I also think that the most important problem for the library community is to define those problems and try to solve them in co-operation.

Statistics produced by the NOSP-centre show another problem: ISSN without bibliographic data in the ISDS file (fig.3).

We solved the problem in close co-operation with the International Centre, which culls the bibliographic data in machine-readable form from other sources than ISDS. These bibliographic data are to be regarded as provisional until the titles are registered by ISDS. We chose to publish these titles as a supplement to NOSP owing among other things to use of only upper-case letters in one of the sources. No use of diacritics and different cataloguing rules pointed to the same solution but it is not a happy one for the user.

In most national bibliographic centres at least two sets of cataloguing rules for serials are used, ISDS and the national code used in connection with the production of the national bibliography. The exchange of machine-readable data across the borders is endangered by this fact. If only the machine-readable ISDS record could be extracted from the national bibliographic record we would use the resources in an economic way. Why is this not possible? One of the reasons is that the rules for changes in the title wording do not always result in the assignment of a new ISSN. All titles with minor changes will be entered as variant titles. A few examples collected by the users of NOSP will illustrate the problem:

ASEA's tidning, ISSN 0346-6582
ASEA tidning, ISSN 0346-6582

No title change according to the ISDS Guidelines, as a change in grammatical linkage does not affect the key-title when the place of the generic word is not changed. On NOSP-mikro the variant title is marked with two asterisks and the complete holding will be found both under the key-title and the variant title. The sub-title is not part of the key-title and a change in the wording of the subtitle will not result in a new ISSN.

Program
News of computers in libraries ISSN 0033-0371
Program
Automated library and information systems ISSN 0033-0371

The key-title of International Petroleum Abstract, IPA, will be IPA. International Petroleum Abstracts, ISSN 0309-4944 according to the ISDS Guidelines. The expanded form will be entered as a variant title on NOSP-mikro with the complete holdings. The above examples of differing rules are chosen at random but they show that in an on-line environment the user would find the records without difficulty but as long as we are using hard copy different rules will limit the exchange of bibliographic data.

The inconsistency of coding is a source of irritation for the conscientious librarian consulting NOSP-mikro. One example will suffice: on NOSP-mikro 81:2 the German Beitrage is to be found under two headings. Beitraege has 19 records in alphabetical order of which Beitraege zur Sportsmedizin is the last. The next record is Beitrage aus der Plasmaphysik correctly transcribed with a German a with two dots. There are 81 records with the correct spelling in a new alphabetical string, so the right transcription is slowly encroaching on ae. The same problem crops up in connection with all diacritics, and when it has influence on the filing order, it may cause loss of information. Mistakes and errors in the bibliographic data of the NOSP record may be solved at different levels and in different ways. I think we all agree that the most efficient way of solving this kind of problem is on-line updating by national and regional centres and this would indeed be use of transborder data flow.

At the moment exchange of machine readable information on tapes is used by five ISDS national and regional centres and by the NOSP-centre. Whether the bibliographic data is reported on work-sheets or in machine-readable form it is difficult and time-consuming for the user to report errors and mistakes to the appropriate ISDS centres. The time-lag between reporting a mistake in a record to finding the record in the correct form is not encouraging. Personally I do not think that there are so many mistakes and errors in the bibliographic data of the NOSP record as could be supposed from the above but I have not had the resources to make an evaluation. A joint ISDS/NOSP project, in which a sample chosen at random of ISDS records from all national and regional centres would be evaluated,

would shed light on this problem. If a mechanism for reporting and correcting mistakes in the transborder data flow could be thrown into the bargain, the project could be of value to the library community as a whole.

Another problem for NOSP in using ISDS records has been lack of classification codes. I have had resources to evaluate the NOSP records that show the holdings of the Foreign Serials Department of Det Kongelige Bibliotek. The total number of records was 2774 covering subjects of interest to the students of the humanities, the social sciences, law and theology. 723 records - that is 26 per cent - were classified according to UDC, 379 records - that is almost 14 per cent - according to Dewey and 46 records according to LC, that is almost 2 per cent. 58 per cent of the ISDS records within the subjects covered by Det Kongelige Bibliotek are not yet classified. For the NOSP-centre and the steering committee of NOSP the lack of classificcation codes poses a problem as we are supposed to extract the holding of closely knit groups of Scandinavian libraries representing well-defined subjects in order to limit the work-load of reporting libraries.

We had the opportunity last summer, thanks to a special grant from NORDINFO, to test the combined NOSP and ISDS base on-line for a period of almost four months. The facilities of free text searching greatly enhanced the use of the data - in spite of the fact that the problems I have touched upon here were not solved.

In order to solve the problems of lack of ISSN, lack of bibliographic data, lack of compatibility and lack of classification codes efficiently more resources have to be put in the ISDS registration and in the NOSP project. The combined NOSP and ISDS data base should be available for on-line searching and updating in SCANNET, the Scandinavian network supported by NORDINFO. The format and the rules for reporting serials without ISSN should be according to the ISDS Guidelines, as this format is used by the Scandinavian ISDS centres and it is the only format so far that is international. Work with NOSP and ISDS shows that ISDS can be the corner-stone in the transborder data flow of the library community, if we decide to put our resources together and support the ISDS registration.

Fig. 1

NOSP-mikro:

Titles

1978	1979	1980:1	1980:2	1981:1	1981:2	1982:1
11,000	16,000	32,000*	35,000	40,000	44,900**	

* Growth of number of titles is due to use of other bibliographic sources than ISDS, produced as a supplement

** Hits in ISDS: January 1982 = 30,200 titles, that is 67.26%

Holdings

1978	1979	1980:1	1980:2	1981:1	1981:2	1982:1
34,750	68,500	137,700*	171,800	198,500	198,100**	

* Growth of number of reported holdings is due to the growth of the holdings reported by Sweden

** Reduction of number of reported holdings is due to limitations of summarized holdings.

Fig. 2

NOSP-mikro 81:1

Library code	Current serials	Reported ISSN	Hits in ISDS	%
K	10,473	6,700 (63.9%)	3065	41
T		4,005	3494	86

K= Det Kongelige Bibliotek (Main library for the humanities, social sciences, law, and theology)

T= Danmarks tekniske Bibliotek = The National Technological Library of Denmark.

Fig. 3

Library code	Reported ISSN	ISSN without bibliographic data in ISDS July 1981	%
K	6,700	3,974	59.31
T	4,005	511	12.76

réseaux
48e conférence générale de l'IFLA – Montréal
22-28 août 1982
Fédération internationale des associations
de bibliothécaires et des bibliothèques

networks
48th IFLA General Conference – Montréal
August 22-28, 1982
International Federation of Library
Associations and Institutions

1982

IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE MONTREAL 1982

DIVISION: Division of Collections and Services

SECTION: Section on Serial Publications

61/SER/4E
180-CS

The work of a periodicals agent

by

John MERRIMAN

MEETING
180

A

THE WORK OF A PERIODICALS AGENT

First we must define what we mean by a serial or periodical. To us a periodical is a publication available on a subscription basis, payable in advance and posted direct from the publisher to the library. It appears at regular intervals - weekly, monthly, bi-monthly, etc., and is the type of publication listed in Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory. A serial is published annually, irregularly or at intervals longer than a year. It is invoiced at the time of publication, not charged in advance and not usually posted direct from the publisher to the library. Or is listed in Ulrich's Irregular Serials and Annuals. Most agents prefer to receive the copies in bulk for onward transmission. These publications tend to be handled by the bookselling departments and this sometimes causes confusion in the minds of librarians who handle both serials and periodicals in the same department in the library. However, a number of the world's largest agents, particularly in the USA, order serials to be posted direct from the publishers in the same way as periodicals.

There has always been a danger of over simplifying the problems. The library user's view is quite straightforward. You order a year's subscription. You pay the publisher's bill, and there is nothing to do except check-in the copies as they arrive a few days after publication. There is often a similar view in publishers' offices. It is regarded as a simple clerical operation, suitable for low grade staff. It does not matter if arbitrary decisions are made about change of format, title, extra volumes etc., and worst of all because it is a simple clarical operation, when a computer package deal comes along they grab it, often with disastrous results. There is still a growth in the number of periodicals published as is shown by the following figures taken from Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory:-

13th Edition, 1969-1970	40,000
14th Edition, 1971-1972	50,000
15th Edition, 1973-1974	55,000
16th Edition, 1975-1976	57,000
17th Edition, 1977-1978	60,000
18th Edition, 1979-1980	62,000
19th Edition, 1980	62,000
20th Edition, 1981	63,000

The number listed in Ulrich's Irregular Serials and Annuals are:-

2nd Edition, 1972	20,000
3rd Edition, 1974-1975	25,000
4th Edition, 1976-1977	30,000
5th Edition, 1978-1979	32,500
6th Edition, 1980-1981	33,000
7th Edition, 1982	35,000

So at any one time there are at least 98,000 periodicals and serials which could be ordered by a library.

To obtain even a small percentage of these, what are the librarians options:-

a) He could order direct. In fact publishers actively encourage this.
b) He could centralize through one large subscription agent like Blackwell's, Dawsons, Ebsco, Faxon, etc. From these he would gain additional advantages from their large databases.
c) He could order domestic journals through a domestic dealer and overseas journals from an overseas dealer, or even by country of origin.

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d) He could order his periodicals through a subscription agent and his books and serials through a bookseller.
e) He could choose an agent/bookseller who offers a complete service for all publications.

I strongly advise a librarian to choose an agent who takes the job seriously, and is not a bookseller who reluctantly takes on journals as a loss leader to get book business.

Subscription agents have been around for a good many years. In 1809 Dawsons were delivering journals by stage coach and Faxon proudly state that they have been giving a continual service to libraries since 1881. The 1978 ALA Survey of International Subscription Agents lists 250 firms of which 71 (28%) offer a world wide procurement service. It is interesting to see that the Kelly's Post Office London Directory lists 323 booksellers in London alone. There are about 12 subscription agents of any standing in the whole of the United Kingdom. One might well ask why are agents so thin on the ground.

1) It is a highly specialized job and if it is to be done well requires heavy investment in computer technology and skilled staff.
2) Booksellers who in the past have dabbled in periodicals in order to obtain book business have usually ended up in a mess and abandoned the struggle.
3) Selling periodicals lacks the glamour and mystique of bookselling and is regarded as a simple routine clerical operation somewhat beneath the dignity of the skilled bookseller.
4) In the average bookshop or publisher's office the Periodicals Department is not something which is proudly shown to customers, but there are of course a number of exceptions.
5) It is interesting that as far as I am aware no bright young men are seeking to make their fortunes by opening new agencies.
6) The large established agents are getting bigger.

Most of the British agents belong to the Association of Subscription Agents. Its aims and objectives are:-

1) To set and maintain standards of service.
2) Endeavour to improve publisher/agent relations.
3) Take up the cudgels where agents and subscribers interests are threatened, i.e. imposition of VAT, increased postage rates, etc.
4) To maintain friendly competition between each other.
5) To invite publishers along to the meetings to discuss and resolve mutual problems.

I also attach great importance to the work of the UK Serials Group, which appears to be going from strength to strength, not only through the popularity of its annual conference, but through its publishing programme, which includes a twice yearly Newsletter, monographs on The Economics of Serials Management; Financing the Serial from Producer to User; Automation and Serials; and Resource Sharing. Also published, in conjunction with the British Library, Lending Division, Directory of Title Pages Indexes and Contents Pages (DOTIC), and Current British Journals. It aims to represent the common interests of librarians, booksellers, serials agents, publishers, and information workers. As far as I know there is no other organisation like it in the world. The annual membership fee is £10. I will be pleased to provide further details.

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The supply of periodicals relies on mutual trust between the librarian, the agent, and publisher, and usually works. Vast sums of money change hands before ever any goods are received, which is quite contrary to normal commercial practice. The agent seldom sees the publications that he is selling because he does not hold any stock and the journals are posted direct. He is seldom visited by the producers of the goods although of course he is very well known to them. The whole thing is a gigantic clerical operation, and without integrity and mutual confidence this system fails.

The agent can easily be sabotaged by an inefficient or indifferent publisher. In these days of economic difficulties, it is of course very important that the agent is financially sound, and has adequate resources to finance his operation. In my view, the agent forms a vital link in the information chain of author, publisher, librarian, and reader. We all like a quiet life with a minimum of trouble and by providing an efficient service we hope to achieve this.

Why use an agent?

Publishers are a law unto themselves and the position is constantly changing. The agent should be the expert who relieves the library of a large administrative load by providing a convenient and reliable method of procuring journals from all parts of the world.

The good agent must:-

1) Maintain accurate and easily accessible records with common expiry dates, wherever possible. Must be able to send up to date holdings lists when required.
2) Maintain up to date prices and journal information.
3) Order, renew and claim promptly.
4) Produce neat and accurate invoices, observing the customer's special requirements which is certainly something the publishers will not do if you deal direct.
5) Have an efficient reporting system on claims and journal changes.
6) Produce catalogues.
7) Arrange for specimen copies.
8) Pay publishers promptly to avoid breaks in the supply.
9) Provide one source of information and build up a good personal relationship with the librarian.
10) Reduce the library's overheads by taking on much of the workload.
11) Build up detailed knowledge of publishers and their peculiarities.
12) Aid the library as much as possible with their budgeting and financial management.
13) Develop on-line links which allow the library to enjoy the full benefits of a large database at a price it can afford. Provide stand alone systems for in-house serials control.

The need for specialized knowledge is well illustrated by the various rules different publishers have for starting new subscriptions. They can be:-

Calendar year only.
Volume only - not necessarily by the calendar year.
To begin with the current issue after the order is received.
To begin with the next issue after the order is received.
To start from the date the payment is received.
To require a special classification form to be completed.
To be available on controlled circulation.
To be available free of charge to qualified subscribers.

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Once a subscription has been ordered various things can happen to a title. It can:-

Merge; Split; Start to issue supplements; Suspend publication; Change format; Produce indexes; Change frequency; Change numbering; Double in price; Go on controlled circulation; Go bankrupt; Cease; Become available for casual sales on news stands only.

Many publishers' computer systems have been set up on a deal-direct basis which means renewal reminders, invoices, etc. are always sent direct to the subscriber. This is a great source of irritation for librarians who go through agents. These direct communications can be ignored unless Final Reminders are received. These should be forwarded to your agent to check because it could mean the publisher has failed to renew the subscription correctly.

The wide use of computers often leads to difficulties, e.g publishers who insist that a unique number is quoted on all renewals and correspondence. The Superintendent of Documents in Washington D.C. is a classic example of this, where a twenty digit code is allocated to each subscription. Renewals cannot be handled unless this is quoted. They must be sent in at least three months before the expiry date.

Keeping track of journal changes is a full-time job, and we have a special department for this with a staff of five. There is a steady flow of information throughout the year, with a peak in the summer when we send out some 14,000 letters asking publishers for their new prices for the following year. The replies to these letters flow in over a period of six months or more. The Journal File held in the computer is our main bibliographic tool, but this is backed up by a comprehensive collection of reference books, necessary for tracing out-of-the-way titles. We always notify through our Monthly Information Bulletin any price changes which we consider to be excessive..

If ever there was a love/hate relationship it is that which exists between agents and publishers. It is obvious that book publishers need booksellers to display and sell their wares, but the periodical publisher has direct access to the customers and in many cases openly tries to persuade them to deal direct. Many regard the subscription agent as a parasitic middle man. They feel they do all the work, therefore, the agent should only require a small discount or none at all. If the librarian orders through an agent it is for his own convenience, and he must pay for the privilege.

I now want to make a few points about routines like placing new orders, renewals, claims etc.

New Orders - When placing a new order it is most helpful if the following guidelines are followed:-

1) Address to which copies are to be sent.
2) Address for invoice, if it is different.
3) Order number and date.
4) Clear instructions when to start. Unless we are told otherwise we would always try to go back to the beginning of the current volume. As the year proceeds this becomes more and more difficult as the early issues tend to go out of print. We can either begin with the first available issue, or wait until the following year. Some general guidelines on what is preferred is helpful.

Renewals - As I have already said, the reminders from publishers can be ignored unless final demands are received, in which case they should be forwarded to the agent in case a payment has not been correctly recorded by the publisher.

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Agents operate two systems:-

1) Standing orders. The subscriptions are automatically renewed each year unless cancellation instructions are received. As soon as the main annual renewal invoice is received it is important to notify the agent of any cancellations. Once the renewal cycle has got underway and the publishers have been paid, it is often difficult to obtain a refund for a cancellation. Any library supplied on a standing order basis with problems over budget cuts, or lack of foreign exchange, should ask the agent to put a 'stop' on all renewals until the position becomes clear.

2) One year only. A reminder list is sent out in the summer and the subscriptions will not be renewed until specific instructions are received from the library. It is important to sent renewal instructions as soon as possible, certainly by the end of November, otherwise there is a risk of breaks in the supply.

Claims for Missing Issues - These are a major headache for librarians, agents and publishers. We handle over 80,000 a year. In an imperfect world this problem will never be solved, but we do hope to alleviate it. It is a major source of complaint from librarians. The agent can help by offering a speedy claims service, backed up by regular progress reports. Many agents issue their own pre-printed claims forms to their customers free of charge. There can be no set formula for when, and when not to claim. The best guide is the receipt pattern. What is important is that claims should be done on a regular basis, as many publishers have a time limit during which they will replace free of charge. There are a number of reasons for claims:-

1) The customer's original instructions were misleading.
2) The agent has made a mistake.
3) Inefficiencies in the publishers office. This covers a multitude of sins from typists to computers.
4) Breakdown in postal services.
5) Strikes and industrial disputes.
6) Revolutions and wars.
7) Underprinting.
8) Poor checking-in in the library.
9) Multi-year subscriptions cut off after the first year. This is quite a common problem.
10) Problems over multiple copies. It seems very difficult for a publisher to correctly register a second, third, etc. subscription.
11) Incorrect address plates.
12) Insufficient wrapping.

The publishers maintain that a high proportion of missing issues arrive or are subsequently found, and for this reason some of them automatically reject first claims if, from their records, it appears that the copy was correctly sent. Others require proof of payment before they will deal with the claim. This is one of the reasons why we discourage claiming direct and encourage the use of our own forms. The extension of a subscription to compensate for missing issues is a poor substitute for the issues themselves, and is not liked by librarians. If it is a particularly important journal we are willing to try and obtain a second-hand copy through our Back Issues Department, although this is often a lengthy business.

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Cancellations - The best way to cancel is to allow the subscription to lapse. Once a subscription is under way it is rather like stopping a super tanker - it can be done but you need plenty of warning. If, however, a librarian has good reason for cancelling mid-term, we will always do our best to obtain a refund for the unexpired portion of the subscription, but cannot refund unless we ourselves receive a refund from the publisher.

The renewal cycle starts up in September. Again, may I please emphasize, if a library has a standing order for the supply of journals, and there is the possibility of substantial cancellations because of budget cuts, etc., the agent should be warned not later than the end of September, when he can put a 'stop' on all the renewals until the position becomes clear.

Invoicing and delays in payment - It is standard practice for the agent to pay the publisher in advance, in fact most publishers demand this. It follows that the agent expects prompt payment of his own invoices, otherwise he has to borrow money to finance the renewals.

Particular problems arise in countries where there are difficulties over obtaining foreign exchange. Agents who allowed credit found themselves waiting for up to a year, or more, before payment was received. Taking into account the cost of borrowing, plus the low discount given by publishers, it was obvious that in these circumstances nearly all the profit on an order is wiped out.

Therefore, most agents now send proforma invoices to libraries who are unable to pay promptly. No subscriptions are renewed until payment is received. If it is not received until well into the new subscription year a very severe problem arises, because in many cases the publishers are unable to back date the subscriptions, or the early issues are out of print.

When the payment is received from July onwards, it is advisable not to attempt to renew the subscriptions, but to use the money to cover the following year. Eventually the issues for the year that has been missed have to be obtained from a back issue dealer.

Automation - For some years the world's leading subscription agents have invested heavily to computerize their in-house routines. It is logical that the next step is for these databases to be made available to their customers by on-line link-ups. Already well known systems are Faxon's Linx, and Ebsco's Ebsconet. Our system is called Perline, and is a decentralized system for independent local processing and offers a range of services concerned with related processes for serials and includes the following:-

> Central Function covering file enquiry, customized news bulletin and claims generation.
>
> Local Function covering local enquiry and file maintenance, check-in, claiming, routing, and journal circulation, news, messages, requests for new subscriptions, fund accounting, subscriptions renewal and listing.

Pricing Policy - First it should be clearly understood that there is no such thing as the Net Book Agreement operating for periodicals, and agents are free to charge any prices they wish. The great regulating factor is that they are all in competition with each other. The terms given by periodical publishers are very small when compared with books and indeed other trades. Most agents would probably hope to achieve an overall gross profit of round about 12% but we know that world-wide publishers discount averages out at 8%, therefore, the agent is bound to make a handling charge. If he offers discount then he must be adjusting his prices upwards to make this possible. Practice varies but generally there are two methods for calculating prices.

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One is to look at each title to see what discount is allowed and if need be to adjust the price by adding a percentage. Obviously this percentage is scaled down the more expensive the journal becomes. The second method, much favoured by American agencies, is to list all the journals at the publishers announced price, and then to add an overall handling charge at the end of the invoice.

Even with a handling charge it should still be economic for the librarian to use an agent, particularly if benefits are being offered from automation. Although some agents may not offer discount as such, a number do make it possible for the librarian to deposit money in advance and benefit from the interest that this earns. This is a useful scheme as many librarians are not allowed to invest through the normal channels themselves.

Periodicals Price Index - As far as I know there are only two periodical price indexes compiled by agents for the use of librarians in their budget preparations. Faxons and Blackwells have for some years been carrying out detailed surveys. This is a good illustration of how agents can help librarians by sharing the information available in their databases.

Back Issues and Microforms - Some agents have a special department to deal with back issues and microforms. This is quite uncommon in the USA where there are special jobbers who specialise in this type of business, and the subscription agents only deal with current subscriptions. The good back issues department should hold a comprehensive stock, issue catalogues at regular intervals, and always be interested in purchasing duplicates or unwanted sets from libraries. They should be willing to search for out of print copies, and maintain up to date records about availability from stock, publishers, reprint companies, and on microform.

The latter, of course, is of ever increasing importance and we have specialists to deal with this. Not only do we gather together the information from the publishers and produce catalogues, but we can save librarians a tremendous amount of time and worry by dealing with the Customs and Import formalities.

Agents Collection Service - This can be an efficient and rapid means of distribution, but it is expensive as the agent takes on much of the work normally carried out in the library. The journals are posted to the agents address, he checks them in, claims missing issues, lists the contents of each parcel on an advice note, and notifies the library the consignment has been sent by airfreight, together with details of the airway bill, flight number, etc.

This service is particularly popular in countries where there is a lack of expertise and trained staff, rather than a shortage of money.

The agent has to make a handling charge, plus the cost of air freight. It is a labour intensive service requiring extensive premises and staff. Most agents prefer the traditional method of post direct from the publisher.

A critical look at publishers, agents and librarians

If the common aim is to get the right journal to the right reader as quickly as possible, what are the factors working against this?

a) In the publishers office:-

Underestimating the importance of distribution makes this the least glamorous department in the company. Add to this poor quality staff, high turnover, lack of continuity, hasty badly planned computerization. Poor access to the records - unique numbers etc. Inability to take any action unless copy of cancelled cheque is sent. Farming out the distribution to another agency or the printer often unsatisfactory. Setting up sole agencies or offices who do not actually handle the journals, bound to cause delays.

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Delays in issuing new prices means the publisher receives incorrect payment. Sometimes he renews and invoices for the difference which is fine. More often than not he returns all the orders and payment and asks for a new cheque. If this happens late in the year there is a very real chance of a break in the supply, unless he is one of the diminishing band of virtuous publishers who allows a run on period after expiry. Inflexible replacement policy, which fails to take into account the time it takes for a journal to reach distant parts of the world.

b) In the agent's office:-

Just as publishers vary in size and sophistication, so do agents. Almost certainly the 80-20 rule applies, and most of a publisher's business will be with about 12 large agents, but most of the trouble will be with the hundreds of other small ones and libraries who deal direct. In particular the bookshop dabbling in periodicals is unlikely to be efficient. There will almost certainly be delays in payment and many queries. We know one where the invoices to the customers are still hand written. The work is as everyone knows, very seasonal and if the agent still uses a manual system very substantial backlogs will be inevitable in the Autumn. Failure to keep accurate journal records will lead to incorrect payments and inability to record vital information correctly. If periodicals are only a sideline for the bookseller, it will almost certainly be a Cinderalla Department, run on a shoestring.

c) In the Librarian's office:-

Problems are caused by;
Frequent change of agent.
Using the wrong agent, i.e. domestic agent instead of agent in country of origin.
Obtaining multiple subscriptions from different sources.
Paying an invoice direct, when standing order is with agent.
Poor checking-in, leading to unnecessary claims.
The status of the periodicals department varies from library to library. Generally much of the routine work is done by part-time, or very junior staff and the error rate is high.
Mis-shelving.
Late cancellations.
Failure to claim promptly.
Failure to renew on time.
Failure to monitor the periodical records regularly.

It seems there are attitudes and organisational mistakes common to all three, and these fall into three categories - methods, staff, and computers. We should be learning from each others mistakes, and that is why seminars like this are important.

The Future - Much debate is taking place about the future of the hard-copy journal. Whether or not it will be replaced by databases etc. My own view is that it is here to stay for a good many years. Human vanity alone I think will ensure this because people do like to see their article published in a visible form so that it can be produced when applying for a job.

It is convenient, cheap and easy to provide reading spaces for readers to study journals and, as is often required, several journals at a time. There is the advantage of portability, whether the reader is at home, on a train, or in a library. The hard-copy journal can also reach, and be easily used, in the most out of the way parts of the world where even a typewriter would be regarded as advanced technology. I do, however, believe that there are certain fast moving subject areas producing a wealth of information where the databases have already come into their own.

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